

By Gunnery Sgt. Glenn Holloway,
DELTA JUNCTION, Alaska

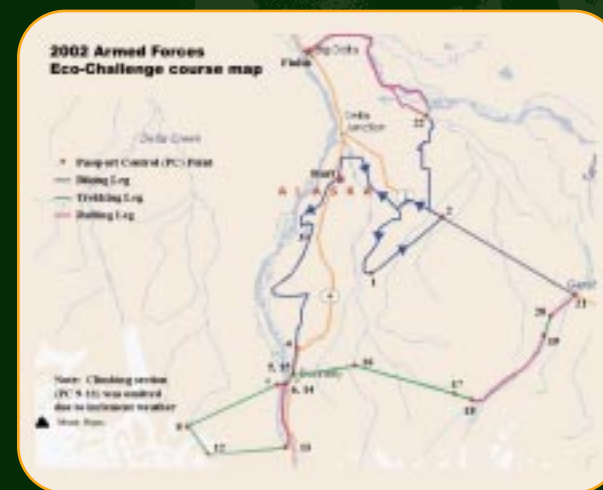
A 250-mile race across the Alaskan frontier pits Marines against nature during the 2002 Armed Forces Eco-Challenge.

BLOOD, SWEAT & BENZOINE

They vary in height, weight, age and gender. They come from all parts of the United States and the world. They bring all sorts of food and equipment — a combined \$200,000 worth. Each has an individual preference for certain types of mountain bikes, climbing gear, rafts, and clothing.

▲ *The lead cyclist* of Team Artic Adventure, an Air Force team, zips through a mud puddle on the way to the first transition point of the race. Rain, cold and mud were the competitors' constant companions during the race. Teams Allied Spirit, Army, and Speedy Mail, Air Force, finished the race tied for the No. 1 spot and are scheduled to compete in the upcoming Eco-Challenge in Fiji.

BLOOD, SWEAT & BENZOINE



Yet, they are not completely different. They share an intangible set of values that drives them all—time-tested values, instilled and reinforced at places with names like “TBS,” “OCS” and “Parris Island.”

They are intimately familiar with terms like, “heart,” “willpower,” “guts” and “courage.” They know the exhilaration of competition and the thrill of victory. They’ve tasted blood and the bitter bile of losing.

They loathe the word “surrender.”

The 24 men and women who comprise the six Marine Corps teams participating in the 2002



▲ *Under a rare blue sky*, the remnants of Team Flatiron begin the long trek to Checkpoint 16. Staff Sgt. Rex Laceby, Officer Candidate John Truesdell and Capt. Darren McMahon attempted to complete the race unofficially without teammate 1st. Lt. Stacie Sherwood, whose nerve-damaged feet prevented her from continuing. Like 14 other teams — five of which were Marine teams — Flatiron’s attempts to finish the race were foiled by foul weather, injury and other misfortunes. Only seven of the original 22 teams officially crossed the finish line.

➤ *Capt. Justin Ansel* eats the main meal of an MRE while waiting to move to the next leg of the race. “I am one of those guys who eats constantly during an event of (this) duration. I used, depending on the discipline, around 8,000 calories a day — easy. I ate food that was high in protein and basically “bad” for you. Snickers seem to be my favorite.



BLOOD, SWEAT & BENZOINE

Armed Forces Eco-Challenge are not cocky or self-righteous. They are confident and self-assured, though several of the team members meet only hours before the race begins. They believe in and trust one another for one reason — all are Marines.

“The reputation the Marine Corps has transcends everything ... we don’t quit,” said Capt. Justin Ansel, Team Ford.

That attitude is tested as the Marines join 16 other teams, 88 total competitors, from every branch of the U.S. Armed Forces on the rainy flight line at Fort Greeley, near Delta Junction, Alaska.

The race, held Aug. 12-17, benefits the Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors. TAPS is a non-profit national program dedicated solely to providing support to those affected by the loss of a loved one serving in the Armed Forces, according to an organizational announcement letter.

“(This race) attracts someone who is constantly seeking a challenge...who is not really satisfied with just doing what any ‘Joe’ off the street can accomplish. We want to accomplish things that other



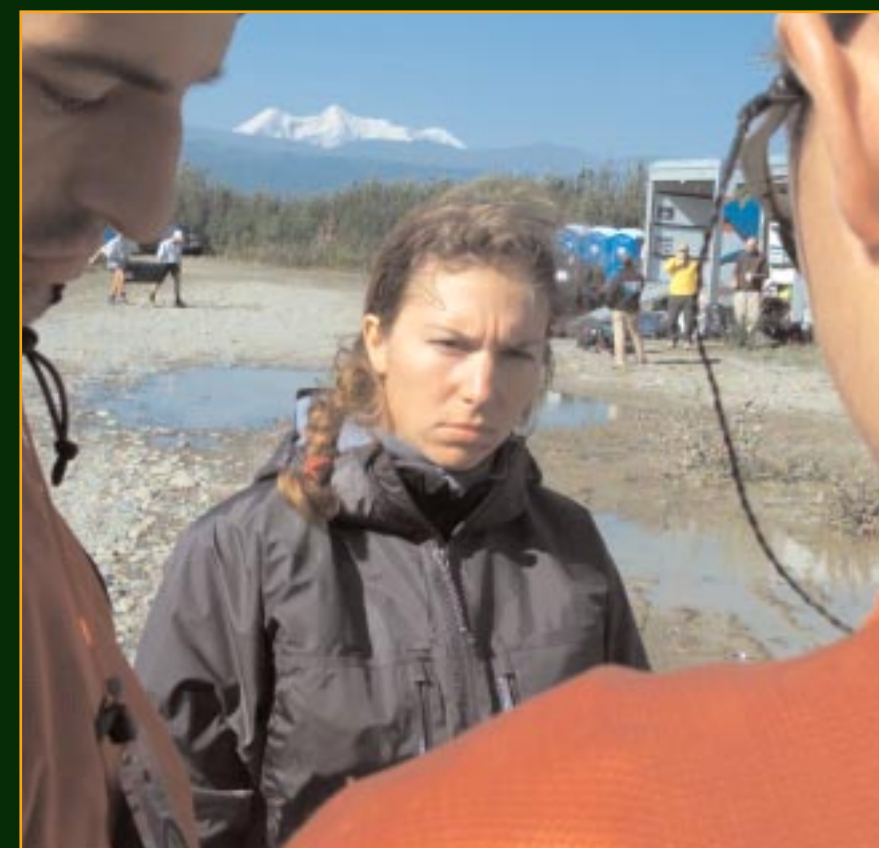
▲ **Burdened with their gear** and rafts, Team Ford Marines trudge across the desolate landscape of the Delta River basin toward a suitable crossing. True to many pre-race predictions, the frigid, swift moving river devastated teams, sapping them of vital body heat.

◀ **After pack rafting** about 13 miles down the Delta River, Team Flatiron member Staff Sgt. Rex Laceby reclines by the fire for warmth while drying his river-soaked socks. Many of the athletes lost equipment in dangerous river crossings and other such calamities during the race.

➤ **1st. Lt. Stacie Sherwood** listens as Flatiron teammates Officer Candidate John Truesdell and Capt. Darren McMahon orientate themselves to the map before departing on the next leg of the race. As the race progressed, emotions became as varied as the terrain and weather of the Alaskan wilderness.



▲ **Capt. Jordan Reece** of Team Bates injects Tincture of Benzoine into a blister on the ball of his right foot. Like most of the competitors, Reece’s feet were in bad repair after the first trekking portion of the race — a 70-mile trip up a mountain, over a glacier and back down to river for a 13-mile raft back to Checkpoint 15. Tincture of Benzoine is injected into the drained blisters to help provide a barrier between the old skin and the new tender skin underneath. The barrier reduces the pain and allows the competitors to push on toward the next objective.



BLOOD, SWEAT & BENZOINE

people can't," said Capt. Nancy Olson, Team Ford captain and public affairs officer with Headquarters Marine Corps. "And nobody wants to be the one to hold the team back."

At the sound of the gun, the teams start.

Five days and 250 miles later, only one Marine team remains—Team Ford. The team is unranked, but unbeaten. Team members run in loose formation through the rain along the Richardson Highway. Smiles light their faces and they make jokes as they run

toward the finish line.

They never surrendered. "Marines may not come in first, but we don't quit," said Capt. Jody Lynch. *M*

➤ **Maj. Dale Blankenship** of Team Ford breaks out the bubbly after his team's unofficial finish of the 2002 Armed Forces Eco-Challenge near Delta Junction, Alaska Aug. 16. Ford was the only Marine team to finish the five-day, 250-mile adventure race.



◀ **Flatiron member** Staff Sgt. Rex Laceby tries to console teammate 1st Lt. Stacie Sherwood after she learns the nerves in her feet may be permanently damaged if she continues to race. Foot injuries were a major health problem facing the competitors who were required to trek about 100 of the 250 miles of the course — many of those miles over steep, heavily vegetated terrain. The loss of one member of a team automatically disqualifies the entire team at the Eco-Challenge.

